BUILDING STRATEGIC INFLUENCE

THE SOF ROLE IN POLITICAL WARFARE

BY JOSEPH D. BECKER

In 1948, George Kennan, the head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, introduced the term "political warfare" into the lexicon of international-relations strategy. Kennan further developed this concept and became one of the founding fathers of the containment strategy, which has been widely credited with success in helping to facilitate the demise of the Soviet Union and its worldwide vision to proliferate communist ideology. In recent years, political warfare — essentially a coordinated whole-of-government approach to obtaining strategic objectives in the international arena, has regained traction in some circles. The U.S. Army Special Operations Command has authored several white papers on the subject and recently commissioned a RAND study to further examine options for the special operations in leading these efforts. However, political warfare is a potentially divisive term, and its implementation is fraught with challenges in the modern world. This paper will argue first that strategic influence is the heart of political warfare, second that forward presence and active engagement are the keys to strategic influence, and most importantly that the Department of Defense can, and should, take concrete steps to increase its forward presence whether or not the other agencies of the U.S. Government ever join the rally around the banner of political warfare. Furthermore, special operations is best placed to lead these efforts.

Political warfare was by no means a novel concept when Kennan coined the phrase in a 1948 planning document for the National Security Council. He defined the term using the following description:

Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures... and "white" propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of "friendly" foreign elements, "black" psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.[01]

Nation states, including the U.S., conduct this type of "warfare" to varying degrees every day across the world stage. Kennan's cold-war efforts, however, provided a model relatively unprecedented in U.S. history for its scope and level of focus toward strategic goals. As noted by a number of prominent authors like Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations, U.S. capabilities to coordinate on this level have largely atrophied since the end of the Cold War.[02] Meanwhile, as pointed out by strategists such as Anthony Cordesman, potential adversaries such as Russia and China seem to be setting a new standard for the successful application of political warfare.[03]

The concept of political warfare, however, as advocated by Max Boot and recently by USASOC, is problematic for the U.S. Government. The term itself is polarizing because warfare implies a specific adversary and divides the world, in the words of George W. Bush, into those "for us" and "against us." It also begs the question of whose political viewpoint reigns supreme

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in U.S. policy. The Cold War, in a manner akin to more violent conflicts, provided Americans with a common, existential threat that had a geographical address and definable borders. Today's world, although possibly more dangerous, is also far more complicated. It is difficult to gain broad consensus, even domestically, on the best approaches for dealing with the international environment. America's adversarial system of government, especially in times of heightened partisan divide, only exacerbates this challenge. Additionally, policymakers rarely find it politically expedient to publicly commit themselves to long-term strategic choices until they are compelled by events to do so.

Political warfare, at its heart, is a global competition for strategic influence. The term "influence" is often conflated with information operations or simply with messaging. While this is certainly an aspect of influence, it misses the holistic nature of the concept. Joint Publication 3-13 *Information Operations* defines influence as "the act or power to produce a desired outcome or end on a target audience,"[04] which is an apt description except that the word "audience" might tend to reinforce a bias toward messaging. The USASOC White Paper, *The Role of Influence in Political Warfare and the Whole-of-Government Approach*, references this joint definition but then goes on to discuss influence in a broader context, relatively indistinguishable from other aspects of political warfare.[05] This suggests that influence cannot be reduced to a subset of political warfare, but is central to the very concept. Harvard University's Joseph Nye, a leading thinker on the subject of national power, defines power as "the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants."[06] He caveats this, by pointing out that a definition of power must provide the context of "who" and "over what?"[07] Simply put, influence is the power of a people over other people. Strategic influence is the power to shape the human terrain of one's world and dictate outcomes, and this is the very heart of political warfare.

So where does this leave the U.S. military? The military owns the largest, most robust information operations capability in the U.S. Government, but narrow authorities generally constrain its use to times of war (although it sometimes supports other agencies on a strictly limited basis in peacetime as well). As with many military capabilities, influence operations are often treated like a jack-in-the-box. They are trained for in peacetime then expected to spring into action in case of war. Unfortunately, the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan have shown that, even at the tactical level, influence is rarely a magic bullet that can be pulled out of a box and applied effectively on short notice. It requires a deeply rooted cultural understanding and years of fostering credibility at the human level to have a deep or enduring impact. This is even truer at strategic levels.

So what can the U.S. military, and its special operations forces in particular, do in a constrained environment to shape the world in which it operates and hone its capabilities for use in a future conflict? Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster highlighted the following tenet in his remarks to a conference on irregular warfare in Washington, D.C.:

The key to deterrence is not the threat of punitive action (carried out from over the horizon). It is forward presence, being already active and involved in the theater you are attempting to shape.[08]

Deterrence, in this case, is a form of strategic influence, and this statement applies broadly across the concept. You have to be there to make a difference. Furthermore, to understand today's conflict, you have to have been there yesterday. The Russians didn't have their way with Ukraine in recent years because clever propaganda fooled a witless population. The Russian

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presence has been ubiquitous and palpably felt in its eastern neighbor since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The worldwide basing presence maintained by the U.S. during the Cold War provided exactly this type of strategic influence. Unfortunately, with almost a quarter century since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the U.S. facing a tight fiscal environment, the military has been forced to accept a reduction in its global influence. It is important to keep this in perspective, though. While a robust military presence sends a strong message on a certain level, overseas basing has traditionally created little cloistered pieces of America, limiting interaction with the local populations. "Status of Forces" agreements exempting U.S. soldiers from local laws have also been sources of contention. In terms of influence, "forward presence" does not necessarily require a large footprint to be effective.

The special operations community already offers a number of programs that punch far above their weight in terms of global influence. USASOC's Civil Affairs teams provide one of the best peacetime examples of influence through active engagement. These four-person teams provide host countries with humanitarian assistance, educational support and small-scale infrastructure development projects that disproportionately expand their influence for the investment required.

However, these teams require the sponsorship and support of the U.S. Embassy, and they only deploy to countries in which security and infrastructure requirements make their routine operations feasible. They also lack the personnel and resources to follow up their efforts with consistent presence in each of the areas in which they operate. A modest expansion of this program could yield benefits in terms of influence, but only to the point that these limiting factors allow before a major structural overhaul would be required.

The DoD has some effective programs outside the Special Operations community, as well, which could be modified or expanded for greater utility in gaining strategic influence. The Army's Foreign Area Officer Career Field is one of the premier institutional pipelines for training and preparing officers for attaché and regional specialty assignments. Officers spend years in training, which usually includes language skills for their country or region. However, after an initial embassy tour, these officers often find themselves languishing in cubicles in the Washington, D.C. area, with little assurance of a follow-on overseas assignment. To expand DoD's strategic influence, Foreign Area Officers (and their equivalents from all services) need to spend more time overseas and less of that time inside the walls of an embassy. The U.S. Special Operations Command could assist in developing and sponsoring non-traditional assignments for an expanded corps of regional specialists.

If the maxim referenced by Lt. Gen. McMaster holds true, however, DoD's existing programs are not enough to effect the kind of strategic influence that this paper advocates. If the DoD is truly going to lead in terms of strategic influence and hone its capabilities in case of war, it is going to have to develop new and innovative ways of getting Americans overseas into positions that matter. The special operations community should have a leading role in this effort.

One way the DoD could increase its strategic influence is by expanding military-to-military relationships with a broad swath of foreign partners and embedding U.S. Soldiers for long-term rotational assignments within foreign militaries. This would require a paradigm shift from the way the DoD currently interacts with foreign partners. Staff school exchanges, liaisons and combined training exercises provide a great deal of value, but they don't foster an enduring presence. Visitors make an impression, but you have to live there to make a difference. This type of program would involve

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POLITICAL WARFARE

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A senior research analyst with the Center for Naval Analyses, Strategic Studies Detachment, converses with Afghan Ministry of Information officials in Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan. Strategic Studies analysts were commissioned by the U.S. Congress to determine how American forces can better assist their Afghan counterparts in the future.
U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SGT. MARGARET TAYLOR

risks and complications, and DoD would clearly need to establish controls to ensure that U.S. Soldiers are not misused or mistreated. DoD systems for career management would also require adjustment to afford U.S. service members the opportunity and incentives for this type of duty. However, these obstacles are surmountable with creativity and willpower, and the special operations community is best-placed to plan and implement this type of program.

Another way the DoD could lead the quest for strategic influence is by harnessing the power of American youth and funding overseas educational opportunities for promising undergraduates. Students come from all over the world to attend universities in the U.S., and public and private grants support this, often effective, form of public diplomacy. Foreign students are exposed at an impressionable age, not only to the benefits of quality education, but to the best of American culture and values. However, in many cases, only English-speaking elites benefit from this these opportunities, and the beneficiaries of this education may or may not return to their home country to work. U.S. students, on the other hand, are unlikely to study abroad, and many of the opportunities available (for students who can afford them) focus on picturesque European locales. U.S. students have few means and little incentive to study in less westernized countries. Additionally, few U.S. college students possess the language skills required unless they are heritage speakers. Consequently, many of the most promising youth in these foreign countries enter their working-age adulthood without ever having interacted with an American on a personal level.

The DoD could develop programs to fund language training and semesters abroad for promising undergraduates, potentially starting with Reserve Officer Training Cadets. The Army already has a program known as the Cultural Understanding and Language Proficiency, which provides three-week cultural exchange trips for cadets and affords opportunities

for language training in some cases.[09] While this is an excellent program and a step in the right direction, the participants are little better than tourists in terms of long-term strategic influence in the countries they visit. Expanding this concept to maintain an enduring overseas presence would be complicated, but it would increase U.S. influence abroad and create a larger pool of college graduates in the U.S. (both military and civilian) with language skills and overseas experience. As with many forms of strategic influence, the true impact of this program will be difficult to quantify and might take years to fully realize, but the possible benefits range far and wide.

The special operations community, in particular, could expand its global footprint by creating a graduate version of this educational initiative that would position civilian participants for long-term rotational assignments into under-penetrated countries and societies. This would ensure a consistent overseas presence while simultaneously developing a body of social science expertise to inform and advise operational planning. The program could recruit promising graduates and incentivize long-term commitments through pay-for-play educational agreements. For instance, three years of overseas service might earn a year stateside in a fully-funded master's program. Another four years could earn funding for PhD coursework, and so on ... Participants could leave the program at any time, but would sign contracts in the Individual Ready Reserve that would allow them to be recalled to service as cultural advisors in the case of war.

Such a program would have to be carefully planned and managed to ensure success. Participants could be channeled towards service or partnership in any number of fields or organizations that maximize their interaction with a broad swath of the local population. Their primary function for the DoD might be the overseas conduct of unclassified cultural research, but they could also serve as a critical link to the non-gov-

ernmental organizations community. In some cases they might be positioned to plant government-organized non-governmental organizations, which serve to address local needs in a manner consistent with the interests of their governmental sponsor. Many countries have utilized this type of organization, including potential rivals like China, Russia and North Korea, and even the U.S. Government is no stranger to GONGO's, funding the National Endowment for Democracy since 1983.[10]

In any case, member of this program should eschew any "official" or diplomatic role and would travel like private citizens on blue passports, avoiding embassies for anything but administrative needs. The Defense Attaché would not be responsible for their safety. They would not have any intelligence role or contact with the intelligence community, both for their own protection and to avoid the impossible morass of approvals this would entail. Perhaps most importantly, this program would have to manage and accept the risks involved. Even with mitigating steps, participants could still be targeted by terrorists or criminals, detained by foreign governments or exposed to diseases or any number of potential hazards. This is one of the primary reason why it should be managed as a special operations program. Hazard pay authorized…

This type of program is not entirely unprecedented. Until 2007, USASOC had a unit called the Strategic Studies Detachment consisting of approximately 60 social scientists with PhD's and regional expertise who assisted in developing and directing psychological operations.[11] However, while the program suggested by this paper could fill the ranks of newly created SSD, its primary purpose would instead be active influence through consistent presence and engagement. The recruitment and retention incentives should ensure a steady flow of applicants and participants to man overseas postings even with attrition, and the resulting pool of alumni with regional expertise would be a welcome by-product of the effort.

Of course, the high-threat status of some countries makes the deployment of U.S. government civilians a non-starter, and many of these countries are important to the influence fight. To gain a foothold among these populations, DoD could employ a host of contracted solutions which might extend the spirit of the previously outlined programs in creative ways.

Again, the special operations community would be well-placed to lead this effort, and many of the contractors who support it would likely come from special operations backgrounds.

One of the most important keys to success for any effort along these lines will be the implementation of a fully integrated and carefully constructed information operations plan. As seen throughout the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the DoD has faced a tremendous challenge in adapting its culture to the demands of the modern information environment, in spite of its organic information operations capabilities. U.S. troops have suffered the heartbreak countless times of conducting successful operations only to be lambasted in press reporting because adversaries were "the firstest with the mostest"[12] in telling the story. The bottom line is that if troops leave the wire without an information operations plan, they've already lost. The special operations community is somewhat better attuned to these considerations, but it must be emphasized again that no effort to increase the global footprint will succeed if adversaries control the narrative.

These specific suggestions serve as mere examples of the type of programs which could enhance the DoD's global influence, and creative planners could develop many more. None of these proposals would be easy to implement, and each would present a myriad of challenges. However, these obstacles are far more surmountable than solving the Gordian Knot of reorienting the entire U.S. government (against its will, in most cases) toward the effective conduct of political warfare. The DoD, led by the special operations community, has real options for increasing long-term U.S. strategic influence by enhancing the effectiveness of its overseas footprint. To put it frankly, if the military is not prepared to tackle the challenges within its own grasp, why even write papers about political warfare? **SW**

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THE MINDSET OF PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE

BY ASPEN ANKNEY, MA | Special Warfare Education Group (Airborne)
Special Operations Cognitive Enhancement for Performance

Performance Excellence

Optimal Performance. Elite Performance. Experts. We recognize greatness when we see it happen. We inherently seem to know when a performance is executed with the appropriate equipment, at the perfect moment, in the correct context, with the highest level of skill. Interestingly, quantifying these elite performances is more elusive than one would think, and generating insight into the nature of elite performance is of high interest in the human performance professions (e.g., strength and conditioning, nutrition, sport and performance psychology, physical therapy, athletic training, etc.).

While elite performance is not objectively understood for all performances all of the time, as a collective, the human performance professions have diligently sought to understand the processes required to become an elite performer.[01] One of the over arching norms common among elite performers is a continued striving in a meaningful direction. Current terms for this striving are "grit," "mental toughness," "resilience" and "hardiness." From a cognitive perspective, it is understood that some combination of the above terms is a necessary component for continuous engagement in the rigorous training, recovery, setbacks and evaluations inherent to attaining elite performance. The important question is: *Why do some performers persist, overcome and continue to improve, while others do not?*

Explaining Outcomes

A key to understanding the differences among performers is revealed in how a person understands and interprets events. Essentially, how someone explains the things that happen. Consider a poker player who wins a tournament. There are distinct ways to explain their success. Perhaps the cards fell right or the other players didn't have their heads in the game. While these explanations may contain some validity, they can largely be summarized as *luck*. Another way to explain the win is the winner's ability to read other players' cards, and to employ mathematical and intuitive strategies. This explanation implies *skill*. The psychological term for these explanations is *attributions*[03] and over time the subjective ways in which we explain outcomes are built into less malleable cognitive structures or beliefs, which create a personalized understanding of *how the world works*.[04] Eventually, the world is simply filtered, more or less automatically, through this personalized lens.

The explanations one makes for the outcome of their experience can be viewed as more adaptive or less adaptive

(Figure 01). While in some instances, explaining a less ideal outcome (e.g., failure on a nighttime land navigation training event) as luck (e.g., no illumination) may serve as ego protecting, and prompt the performer to attempt subsequent training without entirely undermining one's belief in their ability to obtain a successful outcome. Nonetheless, it is quite obvious how a consistent appraisal of outcomes as *unlucky* would allow the individual to effectively sidestep their personal contribution to the negative outcome.

What is of most interest in this discussion is not the objective truth about whether the outcome is due to luck, skill, effort, or other factors, but *how the performer explains the outcome*. For example, if someone were to consistently explain negative performance outcomes on lack of talent, this may lead to attrition. If one identifies as *untalented* then discontinuing an endeavor is, arguably, the rational choice when a person feels unable to effect a different outcome no matter the amount of preparatory training. Consequently, explanations which determine causes of events and behaviors to be outside of someone's sphere of influence, to be stable and unchanging overtime, and to be external to self, are most detrimental to continued engagement.[03] This disengagement can be observed as avoidance of challenges and lack of persistence.[03]

Mindsets and Performance

So far, we have determined that quantifying performance excellence is, at times, nebulous. However, the process through which one achieves elite performance is heavily studied. As such, one of the significant factors in achieving high performance is an ability to sustain engagement, partially attributable to three beliefs: a) that outcomes are within one's ability to influence; b) that the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) needed to perform well are perishable and need to be purposefully implemented for each performance and; c) that the technical and tactical KSAs needed are within the performer's control. Beliefs about one's own performance abilities and the abilities of others are interconnected in a variety of combinations that unintentionally filter how someone explains performance outcomes. Ultimately, this set of core beliefs about one's abilities form a philosophy[05] about performance, also known as a mindset.

Mind sets are a set of beliefs that shape our reality. Carol Dweck and Kelly McGonigal are two researchers on the forefront of explaining that "the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life".[06] McGonigal

focuses her research on stress mindsets: the concept that how someone interprets stress (i.e., detrimental or facilitative) can directly influence the physiological and psychological effects of the stressor. She summarizes this distinction:

Stress is harmful, except when it's not. ... Stress increases the risk of health problems, except when people regularly give back to their communities. Stress increases the risk of dying, except when people have a sense of purpose. Stress increases the risk of depression, except when people see a benefit in their struggles. Stress is paralyzing, except when people perceive themselves as capable. Stress is debilitating, except when it helps you perform. Stress makes people selfish, except when it makes them altruistic. For every harmful outcome you can think of, there's an exception that erases the expected association between stress and something bad—and often replaces it with an unexpected benefit.[05]

McGonigal has also demonstrated that the above physical and psychological health risks can be ameliorated by changing the way people view stress.

Dweck's research on mindsets explains the differing views people hold about their abilities. Dweck's mindsets are a dichotomous distinction between fixed beliefs and growth beliefs. Fixed mindsets are composed of beliefs that "qualities are carved in stone...[creating] an urgency to prove yourself over and over again;"[06] while growth mindsets are based on beliefs that "your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through effort...[and while] people may differ in...their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments — everyone can change and grow through application and experience."[06]

The fixed and growth mindsets are of particular interest for performance. The growth mindset is exemplified by a *desire to learn*, which creates a tendency to embrace challenge, to persist during setbacks, to see effort as the requisite to mastery, to learn from criticism, and to draw inspiration and lessons from the success of others.[06] The fixed mindset, on the other hand, is revealed in to a *desire to look smart* and therefore a tendency to avoid challenges, to give up easily, to see effort as fruitless, and to feel threatened by criticism and the success of others.[06] Having fixed or growth mindset traits do not in themselves lead to success or failure.

WEINER'S ATTRIBUTION THEORY

INTERNAL	EXTERNAL

CONTROLLABLE	UNCONTROLLABLE

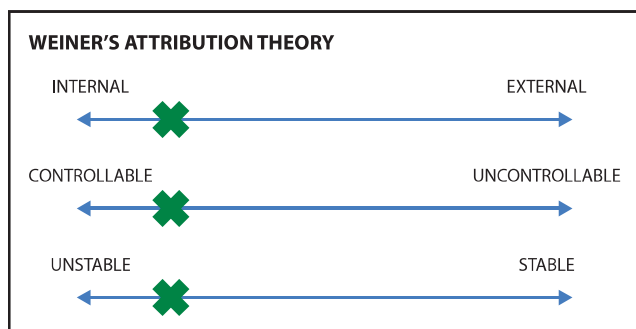| UNSTABLE	STABLE

Figure 01 **The combination of attributing outcomes to: a) internal factors, b) that the performer is responsible for demonstrating (controllable), and c) must purposefully train (unstable) leads to increased effort, increased perception of ability, and pursuit of more difficult tasks.**

A performer demonstrating a fixed mindset may still perform at high levels, however, their improvements will plateau when success is not easily attained or when they are surpassed by others. The growth mindset performer, on the other hand, continues to improvise novel strategies and to seek insights from others as a means to continually reach new levels of achievement.

Mindsets at SOCM

The Special Operations Combat Medic course is one of the most difficult schools in the Department of Defense, turning elite students into masters of trauma in as little as nine months. The grueling pace of instruction and evaluation can easily lead to cognitive fatigue, while issues of human life challenge students to face existential questions. A SOCM qualified Soldier will face operational responsibilities that will place additional pressure on him or her to perform as close to perfectly as possible. This is a school where a desire to learn, to embrace challenge, to persist, to be coachable, and to be inspired through competition will produce medics that are experts in their craft and will continue to retain a high level of skill after graduation.

Considering the learning and performance demands of the SOCM course, support from Special Operations Cognitive Enhancement for Performance was requested to provide performance and learning enhancement training to compliment the technical and tactical training. Before cognitive training begins, it is vital to understand the needs of the Soldiers so as to provide tangible and beneficial cognitive training to develop the competencies of the mind. As such, the SOCEP integration into Special Operations Forces training is a multi-step process by which a tailored mental training plan is developed and implemented for each unique training group. The initial task is to identify the performance demands of students and to determine what cognitive factors are needed to meet those demands.

Through collaboration with SOCM instructors, a general theme of early attrition due to student-perceived inability to complete the medical training, was anecdotally discovered at the first phase of SOCM. In an effort to determine the pervasiveness of such beliefs, three classes of students (n = 109) entering the first phase of SOCM (i.e., EMT) completed a questionnaire which gauged their beliefs about medical abilities. The Conception of the Nature of Athletic Ability Questionnaire- Version 2 (CNAAQ-2),[07] developed to assess the degree to which one believes that sport/athletic abilities are attributed to stable traits and gifts or to learning and improvement, was adapted by SOCEP to measure beliefs about medical abilities (CNAAQ-2MV).

Students were given the CNAAQ-2MV on days zero and 20 of the SOCM course regarding how strongly they agreed or disagreed with 12 statements on a 5-point Lickert scale about the skills and talents necessary to become a good medic. Three questions on the scale assess beliefs about learning (e.g., "To be successful in medicine you need to learn techniques and skills, and practice them regularly")

and three items assess beliefs about improving (e.g., "If you put enough effort into it, you will always get better at medicine"). These six questions comprise the growth mindset and help to determine the extent to which students believe that medicine is learnable. The fixed mindset factors involve three questions about the stability of abilities (e.g., "You have a certain level of ability in medicine and you cannot really do much to change that level") and three questions about whether medicine is a gift (e.g., "You need to have certain 'gifts' to be good at medicine").[07] These items help determine the extent to which students believe their medical ability is based on a talent that is fairly stable, rather than requiring continued effort.

The internal consistency of the 12-item CNAAQ-2 is good (α = 0.74 for the fixed items and 0.80 for the growth items). Exploratory factor analysis was conducted (n = 209) on the version adapted by SOCEP (CNAAQ-2MV) for use with medical students and the instrument maintained similar internal consistency[09] (α = 0.72 for the fixed items and 0.79 for the growth items). Removing item 1 (i.e., "You have a certain level of ability in medicine and you cannot really do much to change that level) improved the internal consistency (α = .74). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted (n = 209) to examine the validity of the CNAAQ-2MV using IBM SPSS Amos 25.[10] The measurement model suggested for the CNAAQ-2 was a hierarchical model comprising four first-order factors (learning, improvement, stable, and gift) and two higher-order factors (incremental and entity)[07] (i.e., growth and fixed). CFA indices for the CNAAQ-2MV suggested that the model did not fit the data and four different versions of the model were evaluated. The most parsimonious model was hierarchical with three first order factors (learn, improve, and gift; stable was removed, items 1, 3, and 10) and one higher order factor for learn and improve (incremental) (Figure 02). Fit indices for this model were acceptable[11] (α2 = 56.97, df = 24, RMSEA = .081, CFI = .951) and comparable to the psychometric properties of the CNAAQ-2 (α2 = 89.78, df = 51, RMSEA = .057, CFI = .944).

Given that the psychometric properties of the CNAAQ-2MV are similar to the CNAAQ-2, the responses provide insight to the mindsets of students entering the SOCM course. Seventy-five percent of the students entering the course think they need some amount of certain "gifts" to be good at medicine, 75.9 percent of students think it is necessary to be born with some basic qualities which provide for success in medicine, and 69.8 percent of students think it is necessary to be somewhat naturally gifted to be good at medicine. Combined, these beliefs convey that students explain that the skills and attributes needed to be good at medicine are internal factors, outside of their control, and are unchangeable (Figure 03). This is consistent with Dweck's fixed mindset. It is important to note that mindsets are domain specific, and this fixed mindset pertains only to SOCM students' beliefs about medical abilities. As such, the students' responses provide evidence that some SOCM students enter the course with a set of beliefs about medical abilities that may lead
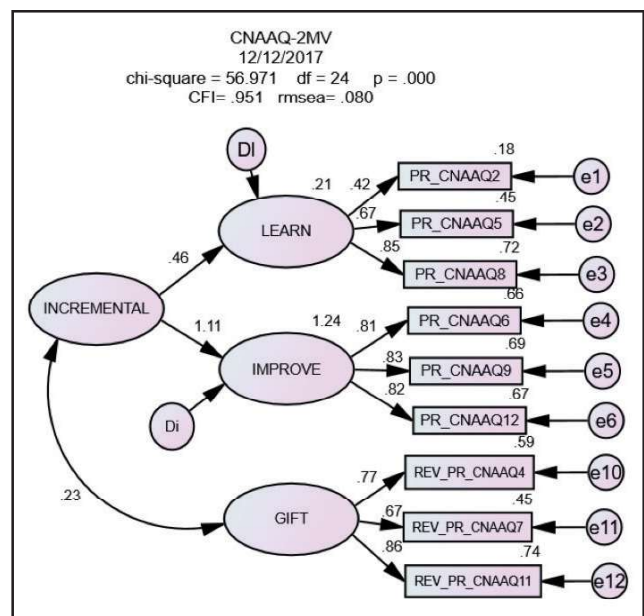

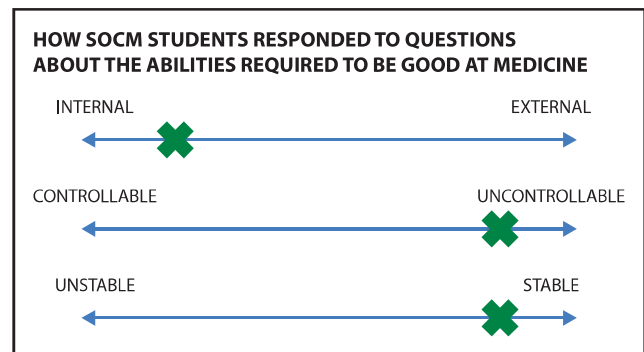Figure 02 **Proposed hierarchical model for CNAAQ-2MV.**

Figure 03 **SOCM students explain medical abilities as internal factors, outside of their sphere of influence, and as set quantities which are unchangeable.**

to decreased levels of effort and persistence, lower levels of coachability (i.e., threatened by the success of others and impervious to criticism), and lower levels of perceived ability to complete medical training.

The conclusions that can be drawn from student responses may help explain some of the early attrition of EMT students. First, if students attribute their ability to learn and master medicine to an inborn quality, they may begin the course with the belief that they have that trait. Unfortunately, when that student meets a challenge which exceeds their proficiency level, or earns a No-Go, is surpassed by a peer, or some other experience common to learning a new skill, the student operating from a fixed mindset may conclude that they don't actually have the inborn quality they thought they did.

In application, this can influence the amount of effort a student will put in (i.e., if they had the "gift," effort would not be necessary and if they don't have the gift, no amount of effort will change the outcome). This mindset can also influence the likelihood that one would want to practice and make normal, learning-related mistakes in front of

others, and can influence how susceptible the student is to feedback (i.e., for someone operating from a fixed mindset, feedback that their performance is not correct can further confirm that they do not have the skills necessary to be successful). Over time, the decreased effort and engagement can cause the student to fall further behind their peers and perpetuate the belief that they don't have the right gifts to be good at medicine.

A fixed mindset can pose challenges for effort and persistence, but do mindsets actually affect how a student will perform? K-means clustering revealed relationships between the mindset of students and their subsequent performances on written exams and practical skills. Students with the view that medical skills are more attributed to gifts, which are then difficult to change, had the lowest GPA's and the greatest number of No-Go's (failures) on practical skills. The students that view medicine as something they can learn but also believe that they must have gifts to be able to succeed have slightly below average GPA's and an above average number of No-Go's. The students with the highest GPA's and the fewest number of No-Go's reported that medicine is learnable and also, difficult to learn.

In line with the mindset research, decreased persistence and withdrawal from course material are common themes expressed by students who do not pass the first phase of EMT. Even students that do pass the first phase of SOCM are not immune to the fixed mindset which may hinder their persistence and continued engagement when met with challenges and when facing evaluation failures at later phases in the course. From this case example at SOCM, it can be gleaned that the mindset a student brings with them to a learning environment can impact their future performance and the amount of effort they put in to the task. What is most interesting, however, is that a mindset can be shifted by presenting novel information about the ineffective belief and by trying out the new mindset.[06]

Changing Mindsets

The value of a growth mindset for members of the armed forces, policy-makers, defense analysts, academic specialists and civilians at SWCS is both evident and accessible. In fact, the art of changing mindsets has been termed "lay theory interventions" involving ordinary, brief, and precise experiences that present an idea that may have not been considered and a chance to reflect on how it applies personally.[12] These approaches are efficacious in numerous settings[12] by targeting and altering an underlying psychological process that is inhibiting the desired behavior. In fact, just learning about an alternate mindset can cause a big shift in the way people think about their behaviors and interact with their lives, with effects lasting several years.[06,12] One effective method of shifting a mindset is a one-hour presentation, including education about a pre-identified aspect of people's psychology that is harming their outcomes. The education portion is followed by a self-reflective experience, such as a writing exercise, which allows people to try the mindset out for themselves.

While understanding the effect of mindsets on personal performance and organizational cultures is itself a worthwhile cause, the largest benefit to be gained from a mindset intervention will come from understanding what beliefs are contributing to the undesirable outcomes and target those directly. Based on SOCM students' self-reported psychological realities, the cognitive training provided by SOCEP for SOCM students currently involves a one-hour mindset training during day zero of the course; targeting the students' beliefs about medical capabilities and teaching students how to attribute outcomes to internal, controllable, and changeable skills and attributes.

The intent of this article was to convey the importance and accessibility of one cognitive factor that can impact performance through the key characteristics of a growth mindset. Additionally, shifting a mindset is practical and the most effective mindset interventions have three parts, which are employable across many settings:

1. Learn a new point of view (e.g., the health benefits of stress).

2. Partake in an exercise that encourages you to adopt and apply the new point of view (e.g., make use of the energy that stress gives you instead of wasting that energy trying to manage stress).

3. Share the new point of view with someone else (this step further crystalizes the new information and provides further reflection).[05]

The far-reaching applicability of mindset training provides an opportunity to design targeted training for the individual matters that effect the SOF community and can change how people interact with one another and their performance domains. **SW**

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